

International Business English Program: Reflections on Design

Programa de Inglés de Negocios Internacionales: reflexiones sobre su diseño

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Abstract

Designing a program is a long and difficult process, but the benefits and the personal growth of such an activity is impressive. In this paper the authors would like to reflect on decisions made throughout the program design of the International Business English Program at the Instituto de Idiomas of the Universidad del Norte. The authors will discuss considerations made during the design process, procedures implemented and changes experienced during the growth of the program. Finally, the authors will share how the experience has impacted their professional growth and continuous commitment to the International Business English Program and provide commentary as to why such a procedure albeit complicated is valuable for anyone.

Key Words: content-based instruction; course design; international business.

Resumen

El diseño de un programa constituye un proceso largo y difícil pero los beneficios y el crecimiento personal ligados a esta actividad son impresionantes. En este ensayo, las autoras desean reflexionar sobre las decisiones tomadas durante el diseño del Programa de Inglés de Negocios Internacionales en el Instituto de Idiomas de la Universidad del Norte. Las autoras discuten las consideraciones que se tuvieron durante el proceso de diseño, los procedimientos implementados y los cambios experimentados durante el crecimiento del programa. Finalmente, las autoras comparten la forma en que esta experiencia ha causado un impacto en su crecimiento profesional y en su compromiso continuo con el Programa de Negocios Internacionales y ofrecen sus comentarios sobre el valor que representa este proceso para cualquier persona a pesar de lo complicado de su naturaleza.

Palabras Claves: instrucción basada en contenidos; diseño de cursos; negocios internacionales.

INTRODUCTION

With the recent adoption of the Common European Framework (CEF) as a benchmark for foreign language programs throughout Colombia, most universities and schools have been designing courses that would both meet their particular context needs and help them to move

towards the goals established by the national government and by international benchmark standards. Responding to this challenge, the Instituto de Idiomas of the Universidad del Norte broke away from mainstream general English language teaching and has begun enriching the curriculum with content-based programs. One such program is the International Business English Program.

In October 2006, the authors presented the paper *Processes and Considerations for Design* at the “First English Content Based Learning and Instruction Symposium” discussing and sharing the design and implementation of the International Business English Program and explaining the difficulties in course design and the considerations we had taken throughout the process at that time. At this time, we would like to share with you the considerations we have taken through the complete design process, the procedures we have implemented, and the changes and growth throughout the different stages of this design process regarding our content-based courses and program design since our first report.

CONSIDERATIONS THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

Since 2005, the International Business English Program at the Instituto de Idiomas has taken many different routes of development and design. The considerations we have taken for design have not necessarily been chronological, but more ongoing decision making as we became more aware of the type of program we wanted to design during the entire process. This awareness has resulted from investigation about the aspects of English for Specific Purposes-Business (ESP-B) which should meet the needs of a specific group of learners, use materials which are meaningful and comprehensible, enable students to participate in their own learning processes, and emphasizes the function or communicative needs rather than form (Fuentes-Olivera & Gómez-Martínez, 2004) as well as having a clearer understanding and data of the nature of our students target, learning and human needs as well as a better understanding of the contextual strengths and limitations they possess (Moss, 1994) in order to transform opportunities of growth.

Fortunately, since we decided from the beginning of the design process that we would develop each new concurrent course the semester prior to its piloting, we were able to modify and make decisions on a continuous basis, without serious implications to the program or to our students. Our program is now complete and each level of the program has been taught. Our current program and descriptions follow (Bailey, A., & Corrales, K. 2008, pp. 9-10):

- Levels 1 and 2. These levels provide general English language skills through general business themes and content. Some of the topics addressed in these courses are budget management, counterfeiting, and green marketing. These courses develop the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Also, there is an emphasis on vocabulary and grammar development.
- Level 3. This course provides a combination of general academic writing skills and writing for business purposes which provides a foundation for the advanced business writing course in Level 6. Some of the skills addressed in this course are sentence structure, paragraphing, summary, and a recommendation report.
- Level 4. This course provides critical thinking skills as its main learning focus. Students learn the importance of critical thinking, how to use the different functions to perform debates, to make analogical comparisons, to manipulate language to their advantage, and to use all the skills to address the five standards of intellectual thought: clarity, depth, precision, relevance and accuracy (Paul, 2008). This course is also the first benchmark of the students' English language proficiency, and students

take the Test of English as a Foreign Language, Institutional Testing Program (TOEFL ITP) where a result of 550 (high intermediate) or higher is needed to be able to continue without difficulties in their English program.

- Level 5. This course is based on intercultural communication. It is dedicated to effective communication across cultures utilizing business scenarios and events to practice and understand the complexity of intercultural communication including topics such as cultures, sub-cultural, high-context/low-context, non-verbal communication, and negotiation across cultures.
- Level 6. This course is an advanced business writing course. This course is based on case studies and business writing tasks where students investigate a provided local company and learn to perfect general business writing tasks such as routine, persuasive, and bad-news messages. They also experience writing specific genres of business such as e-mails, memos, letters, press releases, company “about statements,” and reports.
- Level 7. This course is dedicated to advanced business speaking practices. Again, it uses an adapted case method approach where students’ learning focuses on a local company that they research, create a company profile, and make a recommendation report. During this course, the tasks require students to give various types of business presentations with a combination of individual/team, impromptu/extemporaneous, with/without notes, with/without visual aids, and with/without a question and answer session (Q&A). Therefore, throughout the course students develop presentation skills, critiquing skills, non-verbal language usage, and speaking in front of audiences using business tasks.
- Level 8. This course is our professional development course. It is a practical course where learners develop skills such as resume writing, letter of interest, job applications, interviewing skills, and leadership skills.

Most of the program’s changes in design and procedures implemented happened once we began to design the upper or advanced levels (5-8). Our original plan was to teach content courses like Finance, Marketing, and Economics focusing on vocabulary acquisition as the main purpose of the courses. As the design team came closer to creating these courses, we questioned the usefulness of content courses since our students already had the content in other subjects in their L1 and there was a well-defined need for more development of language and communication skills. We approached the design process as a continuous decision making process (Genesee and Upshur, 1996). As we had more data from actual teaching practice, we were more able to make informed decisions by looking back on previous decisions and forth at what was the best way to move ahead in the process. Thus, the current courses were designed.

A very important consideration came during the development of the Advanced Written Communication course (Level 6). It had become clear after the first pilot of Intercultural Communication (Level 5) that the language skills the students needed to possess in order to perform business skills in English were insufficient, which supported our initial perception of a need for more language and communication skills development. We then modified a chart (See Figure 1.) we had used to develop Intercultural Communication to better address grammar and vocabulary issues that had been missing in the first design. The chart maps the semester by week, by skills and by deliverable (graded event) and we have used it since.

Week	Grammar and Vocabulary	Oral Production	Written Production	Business Skills	Business Deliverable
1					
2	<i>Effective language</i>		<i>Memos, letters and e-mail</i>	<i>Letter, memo and e-mail formatting</i>	<i>About statements, Routine messages</i>
3	<i>Effective language</i>	<i>Individual report</i>	<i>Memos, letters and e-mail</i>	<i>Letter, memo and e-mail formatting</i>	<i>Routine messages</i>
4	<i>Effective language</i>		<i>Memos, letters and e-mail</i>	<i>Letter, memo and e-mail formatting</i>	
5		<i>PPT report</i>			
6	<i>Persuasive language Information Processing</i>	<i>Individual report</i>	<i>Memos, letters and e-mail</i>	<i>Gender differences, sales message, personality differences</i>	<i>Persuasive messages</i>
7	<i>Persuasive language Information Processing</i>	<i>Team report</i>	<i>Memos, letters and e-mail</i>	<i>Gender differences, sales message, personality differences</i>	<i>Persuasive messages</i>
16	FINALS WEEK-Project presentations				

Chart 1: Level 6 Advanced Written Communication global design

By the time the chart was developed and skills, deliverables, and language needs were falling into place, it was an obvious moment to return to the general courses (Levels 1-4) and add in some of our newly decided procedures. So, in Levels 1 and 2, we looked at what we could possibly do better considering these courses focus on general language with business content. We made some changes to the current syllabus, added in some needed business skills like PowerPoint presentations and chart reading, and created a more in-depth deliverables schema. We went through a process of materials evaluation and decided to change the textbook we were using to a newer, more language and business content textbook. In Level 3, we decided to scrap from its original plan from solely Academic English and began filling in the chart to include general academic writing skills like paragraphing and summarizing as well as a genre of business writing such as a recommendation report. Level 4 is currently being designed and developed with the same global design chart used in the planning of the advanced levels and incorporating more business skills and deliverables through language and critical thinking content. These changes have been excellent not only for the program continuity, but for our students' communication development.

We have also added a human development aspect to each of the levels. These are as follows:

- Level 1– Environment
- Level 2 – Awareness of the effects of counterfeiting
- Level 3 – Social consciousness
- Level 4 – Ethics
- Level 5 – Respect for other cultures
- Level 6 – Conflict/resolution
- Level 7 – Corporate social responsibility
- Level 8 – Leadership teamwork

These new aspects address human development goals which are measurable and applicable to business as well as to personal awareness and growth (Delors, 1996). Each level presents a project developed around a topic. The students are to research the topic, plan a report, and present their findings to the rest of the course. These activities could be assigned in groups, pairs or as individual tasks.

Some of the other changes and implementations during the design process involve administration, professors in the program, assessment and evaluation. The administration of the program was initially the responsibility of the undergraduate, General English program coordinator and general coordinators for the lower and upper levels of the program. These coordinators helped in the design, implementation and piloting of materials as well as being actively involved in the program's constant evaluation process which is very time-consuming and demanding. Recently, due to the continuous and steady growth of the student population, the Instituto de Idiomas created a new position for a coordinator of the Business English Program in the spring of 2008. The addition of the coordinator has enabled the Instituto to create continuity with the International Business department and add a face and a space to the Business English program. This coordinator is responsible for communications between the Business department and the Instituto, general management for scheduling and staffing, as well as recommending modifications to curriculum and materials.

Similarly, the professors working with the program were initially the same professors that worked in the General English Program. They taught the courses during available time slots and the schedule for the Business English program had to revolve around these particular slots which caused most of our schedules to be either early morning, mid-day or early evening. The students did not like their schedules to run the entire course of the day. Nowadays, professors working for the Business English program are exclusive to the program which now offers better scheduling to the students.

As part of the continuous assessment process within the program we have integrated certain measurable proficiency exams to aid in the continuous development of the program. As mentioned previously, the first benchmark in the program occurs in Level 4. Our students take the TOEFL ITP and an expected 550 on the exam proves the students are B2 according to the CEF marking and are linguistically prepared to continue through the upper or advanced levels. For Level 8, we are considering piloting the BULATS (Business Language Testing Services) as the proficiency indicator for the end of the program because it measures both linguistic and content knowledge in English. The results of these exams help the design team implement and modify syllabus changes throughout the program.

Overall evaluation of the program has happened continuously throughout the years and we utilize various methodologies in order to have a complete profile of the changes needed. Since the beginning of the program we have collected information from students through the institutional "Evaluación Docente". This evaluation provides us information about how the students perceive the courses, the teachers, the materials, their own behaviors within the course, and concerns about the academic and administrative support they have been receiving. We have also relied upon focus groups in order to explore students' levels of satisfaction with the program, the materials, and provide a forum for suggested improvements. We have integrated students' suggestions throughout the design process and continue to do so as part of our commitment to the continuous development of the program.

FINAL WORD

Course design is a formidable endeavor. We have approached this endeavor from a complex perspective (Morin, 1994). This perspective to course design has allowed us to think, see, recognize and design our courses considering the multiplicity of factors, agents and paths that are open to our choice. Every step taken as a designer opens multiple routes and issues that need to be considered and addressed. In this paper, we have attempted to describe a process that is by no means simple or straightforward. The considerations for design changed as we learned who our students were, as we discovered what communicative needs were important, and as we decided which Business communications content areas we needed to address. In order to be an effective process, being able to adjust to the changing nature of the society in which our students are immersed is necessary. This definitely has allowed us to grow as teachers of language and content as well as develop a continuous program with practical and observable progressions of skills within each of our courses.

Two pending questions have yet to be answered: Will the program and materials produce professionals able to communicate effectively in English and Business? And, how can we improve the program? Once our first group goes into the labor market at the end of 2009, we will probably have a clearer answer to the first question. This answer will lead us to multiple ways to address the second. That would be a great outcome in itself.

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BIODATA

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